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In Romesh Gunesekera's Ghost Country

The French term "reconstruction" has two different meanings, both of which are in common usage. Its older meaning refers to the physical act of rebuilding what has been damaged or destroyed, as a like-for-like replacement. A more modern meaning suggests a more structural and systematic process. The present paper posits that understanding the differences between the two is helpful in post-conflict resolution and reconciliation. To provide a long-term approach to fractures and vulnerabilities, a nation must not only open a Pandora's box of legal accountability. Reconstruction ultimately poses the challenge of redefining national identity. Romesh Gunesekera's *Noontide Toll* explores such issues in the context of the three decade-long civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). Gunesekera's choice of the short fiction form over the novel reflects the precariousness of the survivors' disjointed experiences. As the ubiquitous driver demonstrates by looking at the road ahead while forever looking in the rear-view mirror, reconstruction is a trial and error, non-linear route that tries to steer clear of both amnesia and the trauma of nostalgia. This paper highlights the State's rebuilding strategy which marginalizes the evacuees and antagonizes the Tamil minority with its one-dimensional war museography.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Robert Frost, "The Road not Taken"

We have all gone away;
There is no one to tell our story.
Now there is only left
great land, wounded.
No bird may fly above it
until our return.
Cheran, "Apocalypse"

Unlike rebuilding which merely designates the act of restoring or replacing what has been damaged or destroyed, reconstruction is a more comprehensive and complex transformative process combining contradictory aspirations of reverting to the status quo ante as well as expectations of economic advancement (Gerharz). Despite being more satisfactory, the terms reconstruction, recovery or rehabilitation are far from ambiguous, as they may equally imply the restoration of pre-war institutions, or paradigms when it is often the pre-war failures that contributed to the conflict in the first place (Kumar 2; Barakat 572-3). The precedents in Belfast, Soweto, Sarajevo, Kigali, Kabul or Baghdad show that there can be no lasting surface reconstruction. There is no short cut or simple prescription for healing the wounds and divisions of a society in the aftermath of sustained violence (Bloomfield). As such, reconstruction raises a multitude of ethical issues, whether the term is used in architecture, regenerative surgery, post-conflict resolution and reconciliation or post-tsunami recovery.

Romesh Gunesekera's *Noontide Toll* (2014) explores the scars of war and the problematics of reconstruction in the context of the three decade-long civil war between the

Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil separatist guerrilla or LTTE. This article will highlight the political expediency of amnesia and official memorialization as well as the State's cosmetic or diversionary rebuilding strategies, in stark contrast with piecemeal individual initiatives. I shall argue that Gunesekera's diptych reflects the difficulties of "turning the page," as long as the binaries that triggered and entrenched the civil war have not been transcended or exorcised.

Before attending to the difficulties of reconstruction, it is worth addressing Gunesekera's choice of fictional mode. There have been a significant number of novels focusing on the conflict, although the overwhelming majority have been penned by diasporic writers for censorship reasons. Apart from *When Memory Dies* (Sivanadan, 1997), most diasporic novels tend to eschew the fuller historical spectrum for a narrower focus. *Anil's Ghost* (Ondaatje, 2000) and *A Little Dust on the Eyes* (Salgado, 2014) both focus on the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or People's Liberation Front, Maoist insurrection, and the State's brutal repression in the South. *Funny Boy* (Selvadurai, 1994) and *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (Munaweera, 2013), which resonates with the novella, *An Enemy Within* (Wijenaike, 1997), focus on the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms. Using a similar technique, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (Arudpragasam, 2016) restricts its focus to the narrow canvas of a makeshift camp in the jungle where Tamil evacuees were lured and shelled in the closing stages of the war.

Gunesekera had previously written a diasporic novel about a civil war on a tropical island. However, *Heaven's Edge* (2002) has rather loose affiliations with Sri Lanka, despite the topography and Uva's name. It is a dystopia which nonetheless addresses issues of biopower, annihilation and post-apocalyptic regeneration. Furthermore, the genre of the novel is associated with dialogic interactions and polyphonic voices. Thus, Gunesekera's switch to the short form is disconcerting, given the nature as well as the complexity of the subject matter. Yet, interpreting a festering civil war between two forces competing for ethnic and political hegemony may be, per se, incompatible with a fictional mode characterized both by closure and an overarching controlling narrative voice. Short fiction seems a more relevant medium to challenge the victor's war narrative with testimonies of the voiceless or the silenced, in the Spivakian sense, while reflecting the precariousness of the survivors' disjointed experiences and their struggle to deal with trauma. Although Gunesekera's work is different in context, form and scope, it bears some close affinity with *Country of my Skull* (Krog, 1998), the aim of which was to record the stories of people traumatised by apartheid and ensure that they were heard. The short format is also consonant with Sri Lankan writers' preferred creative fictional medium, from Jean Aranasayagam to Pradeep Jeganathan, or in recent anthologies of Sri Lankan short fiction celebrating hybridity in the country's three official languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English (Kanaganayakam, 2002; Wijesinha, 2007; Selvadurai, 2014). Gunesekera's *Noontide Toll* is emblematic of Sri Lanka's fractures.[1] It is presented as a double-hinged collection of fourteen interlinked stories, with the first section entitled "North" and the corresponding second section, entitled "South." Each part of the diptych follows the narrator's tribulations in six self-contained stories. The "North" section is introduced by a prologue, "Full Tank," while its mirror image, "Running on an Empty Tank," provides a coda to the "South" section. Gunesekera has crafted his narratives

1. In his earlier collection, entitled *Monkfish Moon* (1992), Gunesekera explores the threats lurking behind the hibiscus and frangipani which harbinger the island's self-immolation.

so that his Northern tales have to be read against the grain of his six Southern tales, and conversely "Ramparts," "Fluke," "Shoot," "Turtle," "Janus," and "Humbug" echo respectively "Folly," "Deadhouse," "Scrap," "Roadkill," "Mess," and "Renewals." Incidentally, the title "Janus" is symbolic, as it captures the Island's fractured identities and problematic reconstruction.

The peripatetic narrator of *Noontide Toll* epitomizes the country's reconstruction and its inhabitants' resilience. Indeed, at fifty-five, Vasantha takes early retirement from the Coconut Plantation and cashes in his pension to set up a minibus transport business (*NT* 2, 148). As he plies his trade North and South, taxiing his guests – mostly foreign visitors – of all colours and shapes, "Mister Van Man" (*NT* 235, also 102) learns to realize that riding in his second-hand Toyota and reading his country's turmoil are mutually complementary and explanatory. The minibus is indeed a microcosm of the Island's faltering peace process:

> In my van, I maintain a sense of serenity, whatever goes on inside or out. People like that. A place of safety. *An island of peace*. A smooth, *safe ride is what I deliver*, however long the journey. Not easy on the A9 to Jaffna. Especially after all the rain, *never mind the war*. (*NT* 12-3, emphasis mine)

The van provides a protective cocoon (note the double entendre on the "island of peace") or camouflage, as it enables Vasantha to maintain a safe distance from his passengers and their turbulent past. Being a quiet, unobtrusive, yet alert and perceptive student of individuals and situations, he easily slips under the radar. Seeing, while politely pretending not to look; he is the insider/outsider or the lens through which we glimpse and read the characters. Vasantha is literally and metaphorically a vehicle for the narrative as he "stay[s] in control behind the wheel," keeps checking his rear-view mirror and stops in his tracks or refrains from interacting (*NT* 193, 24-5). However, the canny middle-aged "free agent" highlights the dangers of personal or political nostalgia (*NT* 24, 25). While proving useful from a narrative standpoint, his insularity can also be construed as a form of denial, synchronized with national amnesia (Seioghe). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following a war comprises complex symptoms such as traumatic flashbacks, fear, avoidance/numbing, amnesia and self-withdrawal, to name but a few. Denial has been well documented in relation to Shoah survivors, the hibakusha and genocide victims. The act of blotting out/blocking out atrocities is often associated with a sense of guilt. In *Noontide Toll*, Tamil witnesses provide one or the other responses to queries about the civil war: either they cut the conversation short and change the subject or they see their future outside the country. In the story ironically entitled "Renewals," the young Tamil encountered at the Jaffna Library is an avid reader of Dante's *Inferno*, which he considers as his passport to a more promising life in Italy, but also a grim reminder of his country's self-destruction (*NT* 118). Following his pronouncement on neutrality, Vasantha is forever on the move, to the point of sometimes driving for its own sake, without any guests or purpose. "The future is in pleasure," a short-hand for coral beach packages with a smattering of sex and spa thrown in. Accordingly, the narrator seems to share the ebullience of the new generation, oblivious to the war and "open to the filthy winds of change," in his friend Ismail's words, with everything and everyone geared towards *the tourism bonanza (NT* 140, also 98). The Island seems to be teeming with rehabilitation schemes of every size and nature. Most such programmes are a travesty of reconstruction. They do not only tend to

marginalize or alienate local fishing or rural communities to meet the needs and greed of foreign investors. They also highlight the Tamils' "precarity" as second-class citizens (Butler 25-6). In "Folly," the fledgling Heritage Foundation organizes a two-day trip to Jaffna for potential tour operators. The Dutchmen seem unimpressed by the crumbling fort and the rubble that was once Kruys Kerk. Unfazed, Mrs Cooray tries to sell them the British colonial period as part of the heritage package. Hordes of Indian or Chinese tourists may be expected to chill out on the new Eldorado's palm-fringed white sandy *beaches*. However, the discerning European tourist, they suggest, is after a more challenging as well as personal experience – they even contemplate incorporating war stories to provide authenticity and local colour (*NT* 23). By and large, reconstruction does not operate on the same scale and may not cover the same reality for Tamils and Sinhalese. In "Scrap," Sepala, a low-ranking government official is extolling the virtue of recycling and sustainability, as he conducts a Chinese delegation to the Mullaitivu battleground (*NT* 83-9). However, the tour is brought to an abrupt end, as the guide registers his disapproval of one such battlefield being turned into a film set. The young director has no qualms about using a wrecked warship for a promotional video: "'Don't you know what happened here?' / 'Happened? Are you talking history? We are the future, machang. The fuckin' A future, no?'" (*NT* 91)

The closing scene of "Scrap" echoes the story entitled "Shoot." Sanji, a Milan-based Tamil Tiger refugee, takes an arsenal of camera equipment out of Vasantha's van. His assignment is a lingerie photo shoot of tanned belles running with bat and pads on a cricket pitch. The titillating theme is "ebony and ivory," to tap into the Asian market (*NT* 162). However, as in the earlier Northern story, nothing goes according to plan. The gazelle-like models balk at the heat, the light is too white, and a posse of schoolboys invade the Galle Cricket Stadium, spelling chaos. In the "South" section, "Fluke" and "Humbug" stand out with their exploration of the country's hypnosis with "liquid modernity," to borrow a phrase from the sphere of cultural theory (Bauman) and reflect the Island's pursuit of US or Hong Kong dollars. In "Fluke," Mr Weerakoon seems to be ex-service personnel, reborn or rather rebranded in civvies, as he regurgitates a crash course in marketing. Pitched at neophytes, the PowerPoint presentation holds everyone in thrall with its "bullet points," "exploding pie charts," "bell curves" and "www dot shots" (*NT* 144, 148). One ex-navy officer rubs his hands at the prospect of a windfall as he contemplates converting decommissioned navy vessels into whale-watching cruises and floating casinos (*NT* 151-2). The publicity guru and his flock resemble the stork perched by the pool, outside the conference room. The more the narrator looks at it, the less certain he is that the bird is real: "These days it is so hard to spot a fake" (*NT* 147). Furthermore, for all his talk about success and export, the marketeer is literally out of his depth without Vasantha's assistance (*NT* 154).

Since the end of the civil war, the term fake has gained a lot of publicity. The idea of fraud or a confidence trick keeps recurring in the South section, particularly in "Humbug." The name is another double entendre, referring to both the traditional British stripy peppermint-flavoured sweetmeat distributed at the beginning and end of the story, a kind of crowd pleaser, so to speak, and hypocritical sham. The latter meaning relates to the "Theatre of Reconstruction" (Unnithan), the "baronifying" turning the whole Southern and Eastern coastlines into a great, big amusement park (*NT* 169, 213). In the aftermath of the war, Sri Lanka becomes a brave new world of infinite possibilities.

With its mantra echoing *The Tempest* and Huxley's dystopian novel, the country reinvented itself. Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's former President, embarked on a slew of Pharaonic schemes to court rival Indian and Chinese investors to rebuild the economy (*NT* 210, 218). One such white elephant is *Mattala Rajapaksa* International *Airport*. Billed as a state-of-the-art facility with a one-million passenger capacity per year, the airport is virtually defunct (Shepard). Another megaproject featuring in "Humbug" is the Hambantota hub. Combining hubris and paradigms of neopatrimonialism (Bayart), the late President slated his backwater home fishing village to become a major deep-sea port and "hub of the Southern hemisphere" (*NT* 213). Vasantha is scheduled to ferry Colin and Miss Susila down memory lane, to revisit Leonard Woolf's Hambantota Rest House.

The entrepreneur humours the oddly assorted couple – another meta-commentary on the country's Janus figure or the alliance of opposites. While they are caught in a time warp, expecting to hear the surf crash on the beach, just as Woolf described it, the narrator makes wry observations about the hype over the Hambantota developments (*NT* 210). As a professional driver, Vasantha appears to countenance the country's changes – particularly the "first-class" new road to Hambantota, or the new A9 highway connecting Jaffna and Colombo, which implies more business, shorter journey times and fewer traffic hazards with wild animals. Symbolically, the new artery is in stark contrast with the Northern dirt tracks or the pot-holed roads which almost lead to a hospital or a government-sanctioned war memorial (*NT* 3). However, his social background – his modest upbringing in a shack by a cemetery, his family's dislocation due to the tsunami and, more significantly, his genetic scepticism, influenced by his father's Marxist views – appears incompatible with the kind of prebendary politics displayed by the Rajapaksa regime. Such confusion between State apparatus and ethnic patronage networks has been denounced as "the politics of the belly" (Bayart). Ironically, the same clique that profited from the war economy and contributed to the destruction lined its pockets with the industrial and real estate spin-offs of the post-war reconstruction. Far from actually bringing the island's Tamil North and Sinhalese South closer – the opposite seems nearer to the truth – the A9 is presented as a dictator's caprice to stamp his ego on the country's map (*NT* 170, 190). The toll expressway is not only evidence of biopolitical control, as well as pseudo-reconstruction; it significantly changes the configuration of the Island, so much so that "it turns the whole of the south squarer. […] [T]he idea of an island will disappear" (*NT* 169).[2]

The spectacle of the Hambantota Rest House where Colin and Miss Susila are booked for lunch leaves the mixed Anglo-Sri Lankan couple aghast. The establishment is closed down for refurbishment. The only employee on attendance obliges with the regular sales pitch for "Hot buffet, à la carte, acupuncture, clinic, WIFI. Everything [,]" provided they defer their visit till the following month. The promise appears all the more surreal as the 3-phase restructuring programme, modelled on the Hambantota port, has yet to be finalized, and demolition phase one to begin (*NT* 215-6). When it comes to reconstruction, the caretaker receptionist and Miss Susila propound radically irreconcilable paradigms. For the Sri Lankan expatriate, the past is hallowed ground, and Leonard Woolf's heritage should be preserved, not tampered with, modernized or marketed for the sake of modernity. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the receptio-

2. The narrator's neutrality also provides a space for a dissenting voice, in the face of censorship.

nist considers the past as an encumbrance which can be dismantled and reconstructed at will (*NT* 217-8). Thus, in his eyes, the Hambantota Rest House is no more "real," as depicted in Woolf's *Village in the Jungle*, than its simulacrum recreated in a "real" village in the jungle.[3]

Noontide Toll has a loose affiliation with the Bildungsroman genre, with driving as a metaphor for Vasantha's journey of self-discovery.[4] Although, he has reservations about being cooped up for long spells in his van and not being able to interact with "real" people outside, what was a "foreign country," at the outset of his Jaffna trips, becomes increasingly familiar. The narrator sees himself as an ant reaching the edge or underside of a floating leaf (*NT* 119) – hence the mirror stories in both the "North" and "South" sections. Vasantha's learning curve also alerts us to the country's fatal attraction to collective amnesia/"narcolepsy" (*NT* 180). Driving is not only reflexive, it is also an act of reconnoitring the land, an act of political resistance, as Vasantha considers his role as "the only insomniac in the land of nod" (*NT* 214):

> They say this island of ours is the crossroads of the world. […] But the more I see of it in this business, and the more I meet, the more I understand the real truth of the matter. We live at one of those crazy junctions where everyone gets stranded not knowing which way to look, never mind go. All nodding like sleepyheads unable to ever completely wake up. (*NT* 176)

What "Humbug" suggests is that (re)development and reconstruction do not cover the same realities. Gunesekera's kaleidoscope indicates that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all government-controlled solution to reconstruction. As in reconstructive surgery, there is a high risk of immune rejection from transplanted tissues. The roadmap to reconstruction, Archbishop Tutu highlights, cannot be a quick fix or a single approach modelled on a national or international paradigm imposed from outside or above (Bloomfield 4). Reconnecting a fragmented country is, Vasantha concludes, what roads are all about (*NT* 208). However, the success or failure of his mission, according to Tutu's prognosis, is contingent on "examining the painful past, acknowledging it and understanding it, and above all transcending it together" (Bloomfield 4).

In the course of his peregrinations, Vasantha never departs from his protective camouflage. It provides the narrator with a sense of security, a modus vivendi even after the cessation of hostilities.[5] Vasantha is repeatedly vetted at army checkpoints by bored, machine gun-flanked sentries. Despite being Sinhalese, he is only motioned forward because he is escorted by army interpreters or guards. In the South, Mister Van Man is even flagged down by a brigadier's driver for a private assignment. (*NT* 191-2)

Vasantha's professional camouflage operates at another level. The narrator prides himself on his unobtrusiveness and his near-invisibility, two qualities which allow him to blend in and out of the traumatised landscape. As a starting point, Vasantha has cordoned off the cabin of his Toyota, screening the windows with curtains, to insulate his guests. Further on, he attunes the drone of his engine to coincide with the moods of his passengers and lull them into a "couch-state" (*NT* 194, also 155). The more Va-

3. "Shoot" examines the country's need for and dependence on the simulacrum, in much similar fashion (*NT* 163).

4. Traditionally, the hero is a young rebellious orphan who searches for his origins and returns home as the prodigal son. Vasantha's late journey can be compared to Stevens's in *The Remains of the Day* (Ishiguro, 2009), as he mulls over missed opportunities.

5. He had to repaint his Toyota, as white vans were associated with extrajudicial disappearances.

santha reconnoitres the Island, the more his van doubles up as a psychoanalyst's couch or a confessional booth. He becomes aware that his scarred interlocutors perceive him as a secular "confessor" (*NT* 130), a term and mode of disclosure he makes his own, after his encounter with Father Perera.[6] Indeed, he identifies "[r]edeeming the sinner, rectifying our faults. Drawing confessions" as a pre-condition for the process of "absolution" or healing (*NT* 52). The use of the collective personal pronoun clearly indicates that far from imposing his own paradigm, Vasantha empathizes with the victims. He claims to be non-judgmental, as his service, like a barber's or a dentist's, is only meant to "help them unburden" their consciences (*NT* 203). Time and again, the peripatetic narrator becomes a repository for tales of atrocities about the civil war. Retrieval of such stories is a significant act for both victims and perpetrators, even though the trauma can be too raw, the stigma too overwhelming (*NT* 135).

"Roadkill" reveals the limitations of Vasantha's type of maieutics. Kilinochchi, Tamil Eelam's ex-capital and a "dumping ground of bombs," has been bypassed by the Southern boom in the hospitality industry. Vasantha, who has chauffeured in the rare clients, only spares a thought for the martyred town after tasting the undercooked food. Despite assistant-manager Miss Saraswati's efforts, despite the flags, and exotic flowers, the Spice Garden Inn is unprepossessing, smells of disinfectant, and the rice tastes of rubble (*NT* 96). The term "rubble" is significant as it suggests the reversal of reconstruction and it locks the story in the war. Chasing a rat across the cafeteria, Miss Saraswati intimates that they have infested the whole town – another double entendre about the heavy-handed military presence. The assistant manager's military past resurfaces as she grasps the narrator's beer bottle and kills the rodent with one deft movement. The detente between Vasantha and his Tamil interlocutor seems shattered, as though the two of them realize that each needs his/her own safety valve, hidden "areas cordoned off" that cannot be trespassed upon (*NT* 104). The driver is mystified by the Janus-like hotelier whose displays of blissful ignorance and amnesia belie her controlled demeanour as well as her name, a reference to the Hindu goddess of knowledge. Hovering in between her professional role and her private self as a Tamil victim or former conscripted LTTE fighter, as evidenced by the scar at the base of her neck, or her callused trigger finger, Miss Saraswati needs her own time and space to negotiate what Vasantha terms "a safe passage" between hallucination and political amnesia (*NT* 105).

When it comes to reinventing himself, Brigadier Bling transitions smoothly into civilian life. His military exploits were matched by his ballroom prowess, particularly his killer foxtrot, the talk of Colombo's dancefloors (*NT* 191, 193). In addition to the hijacking of his van, Vasantha is not so taken in by such versatility, as the walrus-looking bigshot eyes him as though "[he] might make a good target for rifle practice, or even a bayonet run for one of his young machine heads" (*NT* 196). "Janus" replicates a similar mock execution of the driver in "Mess." Whether or not Brigadier Bling's ambition to provide disaffected soldiers with routine activity is a form of atonement for his costly strategic mistakes, his message of getting a grip on one's life again rings particularly hollow on PTSD men on crutches (*NT* 201-3).

A couple from Czechoslovakia – another fractured country – evokes the Communist regime as the land of equivocation, in the face of censorship: "Our theatres used

6. The term secular is all the more symbolic, as the root-causes of the civil war between the Sinhalese and Tamils were ethnic as well as religious (Buddhism versus the island's three minority religions, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam).

silence, our artists used darkness, our writers used the surreal, symbols, double entendres. That was the way to speak about things" (*NT* 172). Vasantha draws parallels between censorship operating behind the Iron Curtain and in post-war Sri Lanka, and the need for escapism. Eva and Pavel have fled communism and end up in Croatia where, they say, "the history is not so nice," with hints at traumatic events. The couple views Sri Lanka as a land of amnesia, mesmerised by the death of the sun god and oblivious of the plight of the tsunami survivors (*NT* 177-9). Equivocation informs the characters' relationships in "Mess." Father Perera and his English friend, Patrick, construe the appointment to Jaffna's Samala Camp as part of their investigation into an officer's human rights abuse. Vasantha interprets the trip as a reconciliation initiative, whereas the major under scrutiny sees it as a publicity stunt to boost the army's image. The story is replete with double entendres. "Our little mess" refers to the area where service personnel socialize or eat; here a lavish banquet has been prepared (*NT* 37). The phrase cannot be dissociated from the bloody civil war. The interpretation is supported by the major himself, in his riposte to the priest's inquisitiveness (*NT* 36). This admission of requiring a free hand to finish off the LTTE and their human shield flies in the face of normalization and contradicts the civilian rhetoric. The same conclusion applies with other double entendres like "operation" and "occupation" (*NT* 34, 37). The term occupation is highly significant and controversial for the Tamil population in the North and the major's intimation that "the people are with us now" is read in totally opposite ways by the two sides. As part of its image makeover and to retrain military personnel for reintegration into civilian society, the Sri Lankan army deploys "Tender Loving Care" programmes. The major describes one such euphemistic scheme intended to solve "the housing crisis." Emphasizing that "this is not army policy," his men have dedicated their own time and money to build a dozen homes for the people (*NT* 43-4). What the major almost suppresses is that the new accommodation may be for the likes of Captain Vijay, who has a Tamil sweetheart, or for personnel working for the armed forces. Furthermore, a dozen or so new satellite homes within range of a permanent garrison are hardly going to solve the housing shortage, as Vasantha notes ironically when he confronts Kilinochchi's cripples and flattened buildings (*NT* 50).

The gift of humbug at the end of the eponymous story is replicated with the major's offer of mangoes in "Mess." The "island of luxury" which the officer claims as "our home" is premised on a fraud. Dozens of high security zones dot the North, with about 200,000 troops stationed in the Jaffna peninsula – a density of around one soldier for every 10 residents, figures which are unwarranted by any insurgency threats. Contrary to the major's propaganda, human rights agencies denounce the confiscation as a political act of permanent occupation (*Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice* 84).

Despite the fact that the conflict has ended, the military continues to rule the North repressively, controlling the peninsula as its fiefdom, apart from the rest of the island. Over 100,000 people have been evicted from their lands or homes with no compensation and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) have yet to be relocated – only about 10% of the land had been returned by 2015, out of the 10,000 acres of private land still in military control (Gowen). The government has tried to normalize the presence of its troops as a benevolent force for rebuilding and development. It is customary to share the spoils of war among the victors. Thus, the Sri Lankan military's hospitality portfolio, ranging from luxury hotels and restaurants to golf and spa resorts, whale-wat-

ching tours and airlines has been distributed amongst the members and scions of the Sinhalese ruling class. These acts of political and economic domination are perceived critically since the late government of the Rajapaksa brothers did not only seek to militarize the North, but, also and more profoundly, sought to change the North's demographics, for instance, by removing farmers or fishermen from their ancestral villages and replacing them with soldiers and their families forming the first wave of Sinhalese settlers, to be followed, through land grants and the lure of jobs in the hospitality sector, by Sinhalese from other parts of the country, thus eroding Tamil culture.

Creating trust and understanding is an ongoing challenge between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, it is a stepping stone along the road to reconstruction that brave individuals like Vasantha have embarked upon. Examining the traumatic past, and acknowledging it, is a tortuous process that some of the characters are struggling with, even though they have found their own ways of sharing their stories with the narrator – others like Miss Saraswati have just stopped short of such disclosures as the pain is too raw. According to peace builders, other crucial stages to bring together estranged communities include mechanisms to seek truth, provide redress, and pursue justice (Bloomfield 4; Bala 2). The tense encounter between Father Perera and the major highlights the grey area of war crime accountability. More open to transitional justice than his predecessor Rajapaksa, President Sirisena has nonetheless repeatedly stated that he would "take fullest responsibility for war crimes, thus preserving the immunity of war heroes" (Rasingam). The construction of collective memories can be a more easily attainable objective, without compromising on the truth. However, the victors seem to lack the will to reach out to the other side. One example is provided by the Lagoon's Edge, a luxury resort located on Mullaitivu's killing fields and touted as a once-in-a-lifetime experience to spend the night where Prabhakaran, the Tamil Tiger leader, died (Harrison; Arudpragasam). Such crass triumphalism is reflected in the erection of a statue commemorating the victory of the Sinhalese king Dutugamunu over Elara, the Tamil prince who had invaded the Kingdom of Rajarata, a strange "reconciliation route," in Vasantha's eyes (*NT* 28). Thus, a number of battlefields are packaged for war tourism as (Sinhalese) victories over (Tamil) Evil and Terror (Amarasingham, Bastin, Unnithan).

Even though tourist pleasure and pilgrim piety may be difficult to reconcile (Figal 83-4) or represent conflicting agendas, especially in a post-civil war context, the process of only commemorating the victors' gallant sacrifices is a major obstacle to reconstruction (*NT* 76, Perera 81). In the North, most roads lead either to hospitals or to victory shrines with their flags and commemorative plaques. One further objective of these plinths – a small monolith or the rectangular slab or block that forms the lowest part of the base of a column, statue, *pedestal* – is to inscribe the Rajapaksa dynasty into the war mythology (Perera 87). Anchoring memory as a Sinhala-only identity complete with national and lotus symbols creates a counterfeit official national narrative (*NT* 81). As the double entendres emphasize, *Noontide Toll* highlights the dangers of a monolithic post-war polity framed in a negative reconstruction or revisionist discourse. As Vasantha becomes a trusted confidant in Jaffna and Kilinochchi, he invokes the need for a plurality of truths (*NT* 51-2, 117). This dawns on the narrator as he drives Mr. Desmond and his assistants to the Jaffna library. The government of Sri Lanka depicts the vandalizing of the renowned temple of Tamil culture as an after-myth, the new resplendent building providing both continuity with the pre-war past and closure. As Vasantha contemplates

"the empty shell," an empty signifier or simulacrum endorsed by the Me Rata Sinhala Rata ideologues,[7] he becomes acutely aware of the differences between rebuilding and reconstruction. It is also significant that the young reader who imparts the need for critical truths that challenge the national script and link the ola-leaf libricide to the Sinhalese police should only imagine his future as an exile. Incidentally, Western donor agencies are complicit with this form of revisionism or simulacrum as Mr Desmond ignores Mrs Kumaraswamy's requests for classics and poetry volumes. Practical manuals and self-help handbooks on agricultural management and microfinance are far more suitable prescriptions for the future generation (*NT* 122-3).

More than any other stories, "Scrap" sheds light on the need to challenge the national script of the war. The narrator's critique is incremental and is facilitated by Chen, an enthusiastic young Chinese interpreter who has a knack for interrupting the official guide's spiel with barbed questions about the translation of "security" and "minefield." Although aware that "it was not his place to ask [questions,]" Vasantha exploits the visit of the Chinese delegation to speak his mind freely and thereby challenge the country's orthodoxy (*NT* 82). The Chinese businessmen are conducted on a tour of the Mullaitivu battlefields, to assess the feasibility of recycling the wreckage of war littering the landscape. Vasantha's first act of resistance comes in the form of an innocuous question about whether the British or the Tigers built the access road. Sepala, the Sinhalese guide, is shocked at the mere suggestion that the government's arch-enemies could have made a positive contribution. Before long, Vasantha registers his horror and disbelief as Sepala takes them to various scrapyards. He does not buy the official version that the neat piles of bicycles, buses, lorries and vans are "LTTE stock," or "confiscated property," combed from all battlegrounds by a curator-minded or eco-friendly army (*NT* 86). To the driver, the macabre spectacle appears like a war or Frankenstein movie or, worse, the "catalogue collection of a mad museum" (*NT* 88). Sepala tries to ward off embarrassing questions by highlighting the fact that the LTTE used the armoured lorries as battering rams against government defences. These crude weapons had "metal sheets for windscreens like rusted eyelids with only a slit for the driver to look through"; the "narrow view" in question (*NT* 84) is also related to the position of the teller/recipient, as well as the overall Sinhala/Tamil debate. Sepala's long-winded explanations fail to convince the narrator, who perceives his whinnying laugh as a tell-tale sign: "Eco policy? What had happened here? We all know something happened, but what?" (*NT* 86) These unanswered interrogations resonate as Vasantha drives his guests to the ultimate scrapyard. The landscape is ominous with a bombed-out Hindu temple and the charred stumps of coconut trees like pointed fingers "accusing the sky." Even Sepala is reduced to silence at the spectacle of "frozen pandemonium" (*NT* 88). The official narrative of the war is at once demystified, as the empty and random mass of vehicles petrified in the past signals genocide or ethnic cleansing.[8] As he pieces together the Chinese guests' bits of conversation in English and weighs the guide's defensive explanations, the narrator tentatively accedes to scraps of truth.

7. For these ideologues, "There is only one Land, the Sinhalese Land."

8. The term "shepherding," used in "Mess" and "Scrap," similarly punctures the myth of the LTTE protecting the civilian population. Most of the Tamil civilians who were killed in the No-Fire zone in the last stage of the war were used as a human shield, hence the references to the proverbial sacrificial lambs (*NT* 39, 81).

At the end of his odyssey, Vasantha is no longer only an islanded persona. He has learnt to overcome his insecurities and doubts "about the purpose of roads." His composite journeys have helped his fellow-countrymen, whether residents or expatriates, recover their stories and, as he pens it, fill the gaps in their memories and join the dots of their dislocated lives (*NT* 76). Thus, in his humble position, the driver proves instrumental in reconnecting the North and South and re-mapping the country, in an inclusive way that defies the narrow confines of orthodoxy and essentialism.[9] In its unassuming way, Gunesekera's collection echoes and prolongs Sivanadan's memorial novel, *When Memory Dies*. Vasantha is fully aware of his country's "culture of impunity" (*NT* 52, 229) and the difficulty of prosecuting war crimes (Bala 45). Nonetheless, his acts of resistance, however modest, in the shape of pointed questions, double entendres and wisecracking, while puncturing the revisionist or institutional enterprise, are tentative steps on the road to healing and reconstruction.

Noontide Toll, the title of the collection, can be read in several ways. If morning is the beginning of the day and night, the end, then noon is the zenith, the highest point, in the life of an individual, or of a country. But if the tide comes in at noon, it is at a critical juncture. In *Julius Caesar*, as Brutus and Cassius discuss the final phase of the civil war, the former advises that there is a crux, so they should act now, while the ratio of forces is in their favour. Sri Lanka has chosen the easier fast track to global capitalism, which belies reconstruction as it benefits neither the war victims nor the IDPs. So far, the Government of Sri Lanka has been dragging its feet over its United Nations commitments, eschewing the less-travelled road of judicial transparency and the prosecution of war crimes. If they keep vacillating, or rewriting history, consigning minorities to limbo, there is a price to pay – as the alliterative "Toll" suggests, and reconstruction may be compromised:

> There is a tide in the affairs of men
> Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
> Omitted, all the voyage of their life
> Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
> On such a full sea are we now afloat;
> And we must take the current when it serves,
> Or lose our ventures. (*Julius Caesar* Act 4, scene 3, 218–24)

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9. Gunesekera's repository of voices and stories of the wounded echoes "The Monument and other works," a monumental sculpture by Chandragupta Thenuwara featuring four women fused together to represent the island's four Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher communities.

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